

Love, Dean

[Based on fb171217 on Early Buddhism page, Facebook]

A special greeting card arrived today (19 December 2017) from one of the dearest friends, now working in the US. He writes:

"This isn't a Christmas card—I know how you feel about it—but just a season's greeting to let you know everyone's missed. My family's agnostic but my parents would use elements of Christmas to pick my sisters and my imagination to bond with the family. So, this season is when I'm reminded of my family the most and you're like my extended family to me. Wishing everyone well! Love, Dean."

Dean was one of my students in the sutta classes at a local University Buddhist Society about a decade ago. Since then he has always kept in touch with me, visiting me at least 3-4 times a year. We always have very engaging discussions over a wide range of subjects that interest us.

He has never said he is Buddhist and it does not matter to me. But it was Buddhism that brought us together. Actually, it was a particular sutta that caught his attention. He is a young man with an amazing interest in people and what they do. He would research a person's interest quite thoroughly when he knows someone well enough, or wants to know him better.

He told me that he was profoundly tickled reading through my translation of **the Gadrabha Samāna Sutta** (A 3.81), SD 24.10b. In it the Buddha teaches that one who merely follows him around without practising his teachings is like a donkey following a herd of cows, thinking, "I'm a cow, too! I'm a cow, too!"

Dean loves humour, and even had his own humour club in the University. He was so tickled by this Sutta that he decided we should be friends. And yes, we often try to make one another laugh in between our more serious discussions about the human state, the state of our society, the state of the world, and what else that comes to our minds. He is one person I can't recall who doesn't smile.

Dean is a remarkable communicator. When he visited us, he made sure to say hello to everyone at home, that is, Ratna, our two sons, and me—and our two cats. After he has found a job, he invited all of us for a family lunch. Then, he spent more than half the day with us.

Dean is one of those amazing young people who shares my love for critical analysis and creativity: mine is in writing; his is in photography, amongst other things. He presented me with a serene and enigmatic study of a child sitting at a temple door in the Angkor Wat and gazing pensively into the distance. His photos show his attention to personal detail and mood with interesting composition, which makes us want to gaze at it as some work of art.

What is even more amazing is that Dean has a busy work schedule, numerous friends, a number of hobbies, and physical sports (including cycling). Yet, he finds time to warmly bond with someone who show a greater divergence of interests and abilities rather than commonality. But it is the commonality that brings us together to celebrate life in the tradition of ancient friendship between those who truly enjoy life and love spirituality.

In modern highly competitive Singapore, the aged—I'll be 70 soon—senior citizens, although privileged to certain discounts, are also (consciously or unconsciously) discounted in terms of usefulness, and thus generally and politely avoided. So, we are not likely to last beyond another 7-8 years more, unless we somehow engage ourself mentally in some useful activity, like making an annotated translation of the early suttas.

But still, social engagement has its special and natural benefits, especially by way of inspiring the young in greater human pursuits than the blissful rodent life of measuring ourselves by our looks and against others. Personal, intellectual and spiritual engagement between the plastic young and the experienced elderly is the foundation of a wholesome human society.

As we age, our body naturally weakens but the mind must keep active with wholesome thinking and feelings. One natural way for mental health in the old is in engaging dialogues with others, especially the curious young who have much to gain from the experience and wisdom of the old. Ironically, we today know so much that we actually stop learning, and do not cultivate wisdom.

When I was 10 or 11, I recall being very curious about an Indian octogenarian in the neighbourhood who spoke good English. I was especially excited chatting with him because he was willing and able to answer all my questions. My family and neighbours mostly spoke Peranakan (creole) Malay. We spoke English in school.

Mamak Topeh (as I was told address him) and I would sit under an African tulip tree (*Spathodea campunalata*) overlooking the Straits of Malacca at Tengkera Pantai (the coastal kampung area of Tranquerah Road) behind our long Penarakan house, just a few kilometres north of where the Portuguese landed in 1511 and conquered Malacca, marking the overnight downfall of the Melaka Sultanate.

We would meet almost daily whenever he visited his relatives there. We met in the late afternoon and chatted until the sun set on the horizon, where Sumatra lay. I was curious about his childhood, especially how he was schooled. I was fascinated when he told me that he learned Latin.

Another occasion that remained vivid was my memory of seeing this gentle octogenarian falling into a religious trance and dancing ecstatically up and down the hall of the kovil, the Sri Subramaniam Thiropathai Amman Temple (built in 1863), in Kampung Gajah Berang (behind the Seck Kia Eenh or Malacca Buddhist Association).

Ever since I first stepped into the classes of the Seck Kia Eenh, I had a deep interest in knowing the original teachings of the Buddha. All that was well over 5 decades ago. Apparently, I have now taken up the role of an aging mentor. After 50 years—as school-teacher, as Theravada monk, as westernized Buddhist, and now as full-time lay Dharma worker rooted in early Buddhism—my living experience of Buddhism brings me ever nearer to Buddha's path.

I am deeply gratified that Dean has inspired me to recall some of my formative childhood memories, that was a vital milestone in my life's journey to the Buddha. True wholesome culture begins with proper respect for the old by learning from them, and continues with respect for the young by teaching them what are wholesome in our growing global culture of a wider human experience well tempered in spirituality.

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